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DEPARTMENT OF SPORTS POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

The Potential of Sports for Socially Vulnerable Youth

Doctoral dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor in Physical Education and Movement Sciences

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Met steun van de
Vlaamse overheid

Photo cover: Bert Demot

Dedication

In loving memory of

my grandmother, Mathilde De Leeuw (23/9/1921 – 16/2/2010)

my father, Guido Haudenhuyse (07/04/1948 – 28/11/2007)

Foreword by Abdel Wahhabi and Tony Cox

Wij hebben elkaar voor het eerst ontmoet enige tijd vóór de Olympische Spelen van Barcelona in 1992. Toen was het, niettegenstaande alle goede wil van lokale overheden en organisaties, niet zo evident dat allochtone jongeren zich gemakkelijk integreerden in jeugdbewegingen en lokale sportclubs, zelfs al wilden deze organisaties open staan voor alle jongeren. Wij hadden beiden het gevoel dat de eigenheid van de bokssport een sociaal maatschappelijke rol kon spelen waar mogelijks een voedingsbodem voor aanwezig was in onze regio, met name de stad Genk en omringende gemeenten. Wij meenden dat de bokssport drempelverlagend kon zijn naar allochtone jongeren, waardoor de positieve waarden die het beoefenen van sport in het algemeen, en de Olympische bokssport in het bijzonder, met zich meedragen, voor iedereen toegankelijk werden.

Dat gevoel werd nog versterkt toen prins Filip, Abdel met vier andere Olympische atleten afzonderlijk uitnodigde en wees op de nood aan integratie bevorderende initiatieven en Abdel vroeg of hij daar geen rol in kon spelen. We zijn dan van nul begonnen. Op de eerste plaats werden goede en duidelijk omschreven maatschappelijke doelstellingen voor dit specifieke project uitgewerkt. Van in het begin hielden we rekening met de nodige negatieve bedenkingen die beleidsvoerders zouden kunnen hebben bij het toepassen van de bokssport als maatschappelijke hefboom. Wij vonden het ook heel belangrijk om steeds te blijven focussen dat het wel degelijk om een sportclub ging, die open stond voor een brede laag van de bevolking vanaf de leeftijd van 14 jaar. Immers, het Olympisch boksen en vele andere correct gereglementeerde vechtsporten dragen bijzondere vormende kenmerken in zich. Niet alleen de discipline, het streven naar uitmuntendheid, doorzettingsvermogen en zelfbeheersing, om maar enkelen te noemen, maar ook de verantwoordelijkheid naar zichzelf en naar de tegenstrever toe houden belangrijke opvoedkundige waarden in. Ook werd van in het begin in het project zeer veel aandacht besteed aan het gegeven dat als je strikt en gedisciplineerd alle regels volgt, je merkt dat sporten zoals het Olympisch boksen niet alleen veilig zijn, maar ook de zelfbeheersing van de sportbeoefenaar versterken.

Van bij de start hadden wij ook voor ogen dat het project aanleiding zou geven tot competitie, in de eerste plaats een clubcompetitie. Dit was niet zo evident voor Olympisch boksen bij jongeren vanaf de leeftijd van 14. Daarom werd bijzonder veel aandacht besteed aan het inbedden van bijkomende elementen die de competitie gevaarloos dienden te maken. Na ongeveer 8 maanden was het project instap klaar. Het is hier niet de plaats, noch de ruimte

om de talrijke betrokkenen op te sommen. We willen er echter toch op wijzen dat het project, zowel op Nationaal, Vlaams en Provinciaal niveau, als op het niveau van diverse betrokken steden en gemeenten voorgesteld, verdedigd en goedgekeurd werd, en dat ook telkens de nodige steun ervoor werd ontvangen. Niet alleen de bestuurlijke niveaus maar ook het Olympisch comité, het BLOSO en de Boksbond hebben het project geanalyseerd, er zich achter geschaard en gesteund waar mogelijk.

Het is dan ook met fierheid dat we vaststellen dat over alle rangen en standen heen, over alle politieke en morele overtuigingen heen, mensen en instellingen van in het begin het project enthousiast op vele mogelijke manieren ondersteunen. Dit verheugt ons, omdat het project juist de bedoeling heeft om mee te bouwen aan een maatschappij waarin respect voor iedereen aanwezig is, en net de medewerking, ondersteuning, erkenning van zoveel instanties en zoveel personen bewijzen dat het ook mogelijk is om allen samen te werken aan een maatschappij waarin respect voor iedereen aanwezig is, wat ook zijn of haar afkomst is, wat ook zijn of haar mogelijkheden zijn, en wat ook zijn of haar overtuiging is. Van in het begin vonden wij wetenschappelijke analyse van het project belangrijk. We wilden immers vermijden dat door enkel ons buikgevoel en ons enthousiasme te volgen, we misschien uit onwetendheid of gebrek aan ervaring niet altijd de juiste accenten zouden leggen of misschien vroegtijdig wegen zouden inslaan waarvan we ons nadien zouden bedenken dat we het beter anders hadden gedaan. We zijn de Vrije Universiteit Brussel dan ook ontzettend dankbaar dat zij reeds van bij het begin van het project middelen hebben vrijgemaakt om ons te analyseren, te begeleiden en met raad en daad bij te staan, en dit op een bescheiden wijze en vanuit de achtergrond.

Hier willen we ook in het bijzonder vermelden, één van de allereerste die warm liep voor het idee van het project, met name Jan Peeters, de toenmalige begeleider van de Belgische Olympische ploeg onder voorzitterschap van Jacques Rogge. Verder is het hier gepast om toch de belangrijke bijdrage van de vele mensen op het niveau van de provincie Limburg en de stad Genk speciaal te belichten. Zonder de enthousiaste medewerking van deze mensen, zou het project nooit kunnen uitgroeien tot wat het vandaag is. Wijzelf hebben elkaar toevallig ontmoet, en deze ontmoeting is een meerwaarde geweest voor ons beider leven. Tenslotte is het hier ook gepast om Reinhard en de Faculteit Lichamelijke Opvoeding en Kinesitherapie, Vakgroep Sportbeleid en Management onder leiding van promotor Professor dr. Marc Theeboom te danken en te feliciteren met dit doctoraat. Wij zijn van bij het begin betrokken geweest bij het tot stand komen van dit wetenschappelijk werk. De wijze waarop het is uitgewerkt doet ons veel plezier en is voor ons een bevestiging van het belang van

wetenschappelijke begeleiding. Het dient dan ook benadrukt te worden dat wetenschappelijke analyse en ondersteuning het project niet alleen versterken, maar het besef dat de wetenschap als neutrale observator toekijkt, is daarenboven een geruststelling voor de uitvoerders van het project.

Dit voorwoord zou niet volledig zijn zonder te besluiten met een woord van dank aan alle medewerkers van het project, en in het bijzonder aan alle gediplomeerde trainers, actueel dertien, die uit het boksproject komen en wekelijks vele trainingen verzorgen en vele initiaties geven, zowel binnen het project als in vele onderwijsinstellingen.

Abdel Wahhabi en Tony Cox

Hasselt - Maart 2012

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Sport programs must be designed to suit the requirements and personal characteristics of those practising them, as well as the institutional, cultural, socio-economic and climate conditions of each country. They must give priority to the requirements of disadvantaged groups in society.[1]

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[1] Article 3.1. *International Charter of Physical Education and Sport* – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Adopted by the General Conference at its 20th session, Paris, November 21st, 1978.

The wider role of sport for youth

There is a widespread trust in the **good of sports** in relation to youth. A vast amount of literature reports on the association of organised sports participation with a range of positive health-related, educational and psychosocial outcomes in youth (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Coalter, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt, 2008). Consequently, there has been in recent years an increasing amount of awareness campaigns that have been set up on different levels to emphasise the **social value of sports** and to stimulate various actors to play a more active role in this. For example, the European Commission has nominated 2004, as the *European Year of Education through Sport* and the United Nations proclaimed 2005 as the *International Year of Sport and Physical Education*.

Sports are also recognised as an opportunity to actively engage socially vulnerable young people in a leisure context and not just in terms of participation in sports activities, but across a range of issues including education, employment and training, community leadership, and healthy lifestyles. The concept of **social vulnerability** broadly refers to distorted and disconnected relations of young people with the institutions of society (Vettenburg, 1998). By its very nature, social vulnerability is about interactional processes. Central in the theory of social vulnerability is the progressive accumulation of negative experiences with institutions of society - such as school, labour market, health care, police - that eventually amount into social disconnectedness. More importantly, the theory recognises that the ideas and conceptualisations that underpin our societal structures and social arrangements are the sources of exclusionary and discriminatory processes. Stigmatisation, discrimination, sanctioning and the self-perception of incompetence due to a lack of achieved success, are often the net results for young people in a situation of social vulnerability

(Vettenburg, 1998). In the context of the theory of social vulnerability, sports are viewed as a tool to alleviate the distorted relationships of youth, and the outcomes they produce.

However, as (youth) sports participation has also been associated in some cases with negative and/or marginal outcomes (Beltran-Carrillo et al., 2012; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Endresen & Olweus, 2005), several researchers have argued that mere participation does not automatically produce positive developmental and social outcomes (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, Gould & Carson, 2008). Furthermore, there is no empirical evidence base indicating a direct causal relationship between doing sports and positive youth development or any other beneficial social outcomes for that matter (Long & Sanderson, 2001, Theeboom et al., 2010). In general, research on the relationships between sports and youth development has led scholars to conclude that the relationship is contingent on context (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2011).

Notwithstanding the lack of circumstantial evidence to make the case for sport's wider role (Long & Sanderson, 2001), the public opinion about the wider social role of sports is still in favour of its proponents. Furthermore, from a policymaker's perspective, sports seem to provide a convincing, highly visible and cost effective tool to work towards wider outcomes for socially vulnerable groups in society (Hartmann, 2001).

Sport as a policy-tool in Flanders

Over the past years, **Flemish** (northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) sports policy makers and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the use of the positive social role of sports. The Flemish decree of 2007 regarding the subsidisation of municipal and provincial governments for a sport-for-all policy (Sport-for-All decree) and the decree of 2008 regarding measures to stimulate participation in culture, youth work and sport (Participation decree), emphasised the need for a higher accessibility of specific segments of

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society to become more sports active and, as such, experience more the benefits of sports. The recent changes that have been formulated with regard to the 2007 Sport-for-All decree also emphasise the importance of providing disadvantaged groups more access to sport (through an alternatively organised sports offer and a sport policy that is based on a transversal collaboration with other policy domains). However, past policies and practices in Flanders have not been subjected to any form of systematic and scientific evaluation, which would allow existing practices to optimise their activities (Theeboom et al., 2010). It could be argued that, to date, there is no comprehensive Flemish policy strategy in relation to using sports as a social tool for working with socially vulnerable groups.

A quick look at the Flemish landscape

Today, a variety of Flemish initiatives make use of sports, not merely as an end in itself, but also as a means to serve various social purposes, often with regard to specific target groups (e.g., youth, elderly, disabled persons, socially deprived people). In particular, sports have been regarded more and more as a means to improve the situation of deprived groups in Flemish society (e.g., with regard to social integration and participation of socially vulnerable groups, promotion of social cohesion, prevention of delinquency and criminal behaviour among socially deprived youth).

Specifically with regard to socially vulnerable youth, an increasing number of initiatives have been set up in Flanders in recent years in which sports are employed as an instrument to achieve positive developmental goals among young people (De Knop & Theeboom, 1999; Theeboom et al., 2008b). There are a variety of socio-cultural organisations and services in Flanders that organise programs and initiatives in which sports are used from a youth developmental and social pedagogical perspective. These initiatives can be situated within a number of sectors (see Theeboom, 2007):

The **youth sector** is probably one of the first sectors in Flanders that became actively involved in the provision of organised sports programs aimed at the personal and social development of socially vulnerable youth. This has been in line with their emancipatory approach of working with youngsters. While at first, sports were only occasionally included in the regular youth programs, from the late '80s onwards, sports became a more important part in their programming. Gradually, more specific initiatives have been set up by sports-minded youth workers as part of their regular work.

Various organisations within the **welfare sector** in Flanders have also started to make use of sports as a means of personal and social development of specific groups of young people. For example, over the years, there has been an increased interest in Flanders to set up special youth sports programs in relation to interculturalism, diversity, racism, community development, migration, prevention, employability, special youth care, detention, poverty, delinquency, drug addiction, homelessness, etc.

Since the nineties, **local governments** (municipalities) have started to recognise the potential of sports from a broader social perspective in various aspects of their policy. Until then, sport promotion was primarily regarded from a physical health and leisure perspective. Gradually however, the organisation and provision of sports was also viewed in terms of contribution to general welfare. This resulted, for example, in a shift in local sports policies where municipal sports services started organising so-called community or neighbourhood sports activities ('buurtsport'). This alternative sports organisational format is characterised by its flexible organisation in which a number of local structures work together in providing highly accessible sports activities. While the majority of Flemish municipalities use their neighbourhood sports programs to stimulate sports participation among its population as part of their sport-for-all policy, cities and larger municipalities in Flanders are also using it to aim at the social integration of specific (mostly underprivileged) target groups. Especially within

larger municipalities and cities, to an increasing extent, sports became a part of other municipal policy domains, such as youth and social welfare.

There is long history of viewing sports, as part of a physical education curriculum, to achieve a variety of outcomes relating to the individual (Bailey et al., 2009). Related to the sector of **formal education** (i.e., schools), sports have also been given a role in working with disadvantaged and socially vulnerable youth, particularly in the context of the Extended Schools ('Brede School') and Sport-after-School Programs. The concept of the extended schools comprise local networks between schools and all sorts of leisure organisations (youth work, arts, sport clubs…) that are set up to foster and widen the learning experiences of children and to bring organised leisure activities closer to socially marginalised youth groups (Ernalsteen & Joos, 2011). Interesting to note, is that more recently the notion of the Extended Sports Club ('Brede Sport Club') has also surfaced, referring to sports clubs that take up a wider social role in relation to the community or neighbourhood in which they reside.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly at first sight, the **sports sector** is one of the last sectors that have started to regard sports from a broader social perspective. As Theeboom et al. (2010) argued, the organised sports sector in Flanders has never played any significant role in the provision of sports opportunities for underprivileged or disadvantaged youth. While since long, sports are primarily viewed in this setting as a means in itself (as a leisure activity), in more recent years, there has been a (gradually) growing awareness within this sector that sports can also be regarded as a means to serve broader social purposes. For example, there is an increasing emphasis to view sports as an eye-catcher or fly-paper to draw attention to social problems, as illustrated by numerous cases in which sports is used to raise awareness or funding to fight diseases such as cancer and HIV/aids or to tackle problems such as racism, discrimination and poverty. Still, the unsettled position of the organised sports sector to play a bigger role in a more inclusive sport-for-all movement, paved the way for the development of

other sports delivery structures (as mentioned above) that are not traditionally linked to sports (Theeboom et al., 2010).

Sport, what is it good for…?

In general, there are a number of **reasons** why these sectors have started to use sports from a developmental and social perspective with regard to youngsters. First, and perhaps foremost, is the fact that sports attract many young people. Recent Flemish data show that almost 3 out of 4 youngsters between the age of 10 and 17 are involved in at least one sport (Scheerder et al., 2011). These figures illustrate that sport is a highly accessible activity that allows large numbers of youngsters to become involved. It has been indicated that in comparison with other socio-cultural activities and initiatives (e.g., youth movements, youth centres, youth out-reach practices), sports-based activities seem to provide rich contexts for reaching so-called *harder-to-reach* youth (Feinstein et al., 2005; Vanhoutte, 2007). The rule-based setting, the game-competition elements, the inherent structural characteristics and the specific physical, cognitive and tactical skills make sports-based activities distinctively different from other forms of organised leisure activities. Consequently, recognising such inherent qualities, sports activities are often implemented across different policy domains as an opportunity to actively engage young people in a leisure context. Additionally, it has been argued that wider benefits accruing from organised sports involvement are stronger for disadvantaged youth with social, academic deficits, and families residing in high-risk neighbourhoods (Feinstein et al., 2005; Mahoney et al., 2005).

Second, sports are regarded as a good opportunity for physical, mental and social engagement. It is a universal activity (with a so-called universal language) and is therefore viewed as a possible instrument to break down barriers between participants, as well as with non-participants. In this context, the notion that sports participation can lead to the creation of

different forms of social, cultural and human capital has been the focal point for many researchers and policy makers (Theeboom et al., 2011).

And third, there is a general belief in the good of sports, which almost 'naturally' leads to the use of sports as an answer to a number of personal and social issues today's youth is confronted with. Besides physical fitness and improved health, the proclaimed potential benefits of participation in sports are improved mental health and psychological well-being (leading to reduction of anxiety and stress), personality development (via improved self-concept, physical and global self-esteem/confidence, self-confidence and increased locus of control), socio-psychological benefits (such as empathy, integrity, tolerance, cooperation, trustworthiness and the development of social skills) and broader sociological impacts (such as increased community identity, social coherence and integration) (e.g., Bailey et al., 2009; Coalter, 2005; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, Gould & Carson, 2008; Petitpas et al., 2005) .

Sport's wider role from an European perspective

On the **European level**, the Commission's White Paper on Sport of 2007 also draws the attention, among other things, on the specific needs and situation of underrepresented groups in society. It also calls for a better use of the potential of sports as an instrument for social integration in the policies, actions and programs of the European Union and of its Member States. According to the European Commission, sports have a major potential as a tool for promoting social inclusion and social cohesion in European societies.

It provides citizens with opportunities to interact and join social networks; it helps immigrants to develop relations with other member of society; and it constitutes a tool for reaching out to the underprivileged or groups at risk of or facing discrimination. Through its contribution to economic growth and job creation, it can also help to revitalise disadvantaged areas.

Both on the Flemish as well as on the European level, there is however a growing awareness that more knowledge and expertise is needed to raise the social potential of sports. This can be illustrated by the fact that Flanders, being responsible for sport during the 2010 Belgian's presidency of the EU, organised a *European conference on local sport participation and social inclusion* with over 150 representatives from 25 member states. The recommendations that were presented to the Flemish Minister of Sport, Philippe Muyters, were afterwards also formulated at a meeting of the Ministers of Sport of the EU in December 2010. The recommendations referred, among other things, to *"... systematic monitoring and (process) evaluation as an essential aspect of policy implementation ..."* and to *"stimulate development of knowledge regarding sufficient conditions with regard to social inclusion through sport..."* .

Diversity of practice, fragmentation of knowledge and expertise

While, as described above, there is diversity with regard to programs and sectors in Flanders where sports are used as a developmental and social 'instrument' for vulnerable youth, it is interesting to note that the terms in which the aims of most of these programs have been described are very identical. Besides referring to the provision of a *meaningful and enjoyable leisure activity*, most of these initiatives indicate to aim for *social integration/inclusion* and/or the *enhancement of personal and social development* (Theeboom et al., 2008a). Although, according to Theeboom et al. (2008a), both (generic) concepts can be regarded as similar to a certain extent, it is possible to make a distinction between two levels. The first level can be situated within the sporting context, the second level can be found within a broader context (family, leisure, school and/or society). A way to simplify might be to distinguish between *social integration in sport* and *social integration through spor*t. The former stresses processes that occur in a sporting context (equal participation, improved sport skills), the latter refers to opportunities that can arise from participating in sports for the

involvement within other contexts (personal/social development; community regeneration/social capital). It can be noted that a combination is also possible, in which, for example, personal/social development and changed behaviour will (only) occur in a sporting context.

However, generating a firm knowledge base and expertise regarding using sports to achieve wider social outcomes has proven to be difficult to establish. For Flanders, this can be explained by the diversity of sports structures - across different policy domains - that are providing sporting opportunities for specific groups within society, and by the rather passive involvement of the primary sports sector in providing such opportunities. This has led to a fragmentation of expertise within each of the identified policy sectors (youth, welfare, sport). It has been indicated that most sport initiatives targeted at specific groups do not operate in optimal conditions (Theeboom et al., 2008a). The identified **deficiencies** were related to inadequate social and pedagogical skills of coaching and teaching staff, limited structural cooperation with partner organisations, unavailability of sports facilities and limited accessibility of activities. Notwithstanding the present deficiencies, alternative (community-based) sports provision schemes have become a well-established and recognised concept of reaching out to socially vulnerable groups.

So, despite the fact that many sports-based practices aimed at wider social outcomes can be found in Flanders, a systematic framework and guiding principles of successful initiatives are largely missing. There is a lack of insight in the necessary conditions of successful programs in terms of creating an added value through sport participation. In this context, Lawson (2005) has argued that knowledge and understanding in these domains are short in supply. The underlying causes for this **knowledge gap** need to be found in the often taken for granted beliefs or storylines on the social beneficial outcomes that are attributed to sport participation. In light of this, Green (2008, p. 132) argued *"the belief that sport builds*

character is so ingrained that neither providers nor participants feel it necessary to do anything more than to provide opportunities". In other words, it is uncritically assumed that participation in itself will contribute to processes of (re)integration and/or inclusion of socially vulnerable groups. Also, the difficulty and complexity of attributing social outcomes to specific sports practices (a challenge on its own) and understanding the mechanisms that are assumed to bring about social outcomes, have been responsible for widening this knowledge gap.

Aim of the PhD study

Research free zones

There has been a growing awareness among social (sports) scientists that the cumulative evidence base for the developmental and social role of sports in relation to specific target groups is relatively weak. For example, Coalter (2011) argued that sports-based social practices are mostly guided by *inflated promises* and *lack of intellectual clarity*. It is often not clear why it is assumed that participation in particular sports programs can have certain impacts on people participating in them. The underlying (often unquestioned) logic is that sporting outcomes (e.g., skill development) facilitated by a certain degree of an organised sports involvement, might eventually lead to intermediate changes at the individual level (e.g., pro-social development), which in turn might lead to broader societal changes (e.g., social cohesion). But the underlying processes that instigate these changes are unknown and seldom formulated. In a more general context, it has been indicated that, to date, many functions and meanings attributed to sports lack a sound empirical foundation (Hoyng et al., 1998). What actually happens within sports-based social practices has been described as **research free zones** (Coalter, 2011).

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The aim of this PhD study is to gain a better insight in how sports practices working with socially vulnerable youth can effectively generate wider social outcomes. In other words, the study aims at shedding more light on the so-called research free zones. This is not a study about how to better reach socially vulnerable young people and include them in mainstream sports provisions, although insights in such processes are evenly research free zones in Flanders. Important to note, is that including young people in an organised sports provision is on it's own not enough when working towards broader social outcomes.

Integration and participation

It has been argued that in Flanders the sports policy focus in terms of vulnerable groups has shifted from '*sport for good'* (e.g., sports as a means for integration) towards '*sport for sport's sake'* (e.g., sports as a means for participation) (Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2011). Several reasons have been identified such as a blind obsession regarding accessibility ('everybody has to participate'), an almost evangelistic belief in the power of sports and a lack of policy tools (and commitment!) allowing to effectively evaluate the inner-workings of sport interventions and policies (Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2011). A similar **policy shift** has been observed in other countries such, for example, The United Kingdom (Collins, 2010). Integration through sports and participation in sports do not cancel each other out, but they are however two inherently different things, and should also be treated as such. The danger of putting to much emphasis on 'just participation' in terms of working with socially vulnerable groups towards broader outcomes, could lead to downplaying the societal structures and arrangements that exclude people in the first place (with a possible consequence that such mainstream structures and arrangements will stay rather passive and unengaged regarding socially vulnerable groups). Interestingly, in relation to the discussion about participation and

integration, policy research in youth work in Flanders has reached similar conclusions (Cousseé, 2006).

The narrow focus on sports participation, with the implicit assumption that participation will lead to integration, has also led to limited insights in how to best support and improve sports practices working with socially vulnerable groups, aiming at achieving social outcomes.

Necessary and sufficient conditions

In this context it is worthwhile to mention the difference between necessary and sufficient **conditions** (Coalter, 2007). According to Coalter (2007), necessary conditions are those that need to be fulfilled, so that socially vulnerable youth become involved in sports, and stay involved. The sufficient conditions are the conditions that maximize the potential wider social outcomes. Both types of conditions can be studied (and implemented) across different sports programs or interventions, irrespective of their perceived traditional or alternative 'community or neighbourhood' characteristics. The distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions is, in terms of better understanding the social value of sports regarding socially vulnerable groups, much more helpful than the often used traditional and alternative dichotomy. The distinction between 'traditional' and 'alternative' sports schemes stays rather vague. What are the distinctive features of traditional and alternative organised sports practices, and how are these related to wider social outcomes? And also, what is the usefulness of making such a distinction?

Moreover, the division between traditional and alternative sports provisions runs the danger of creating a schism between mainstream and non-mainstream provisions, which can consequently undermine the social potential of sports for youth, and in particular socially vulnerable groups. Illustrative for this is, as already indicated, that sports-based social

practices in Flanders are to some extent fragmented and that more traditional mainstream sports provision structures have not taken up a more pro-active role in working towards creating the necessary and sufficient conditions for socially vulnerable groups. Pluralization and diversification are necessary qualities for a sports policy and practice that aims at reaching a wide diversity of people, but taken to far, they can lead to a fragmentation (or even balkanization) of policy and societal (e.g., cultural, economical, social) resources.

The focus of the PhD study will be on the sufficient conditions in relation to sports-based practices working with socially vulnerable youth. It has to be noted that the distinction between necessary and sufficient is not clear-cut. It can be reasonable assumed that there is a synergic interplay between necessary (i.e. reaching socially vulnerable people) and sufficient conditions (i.e. working with socially vulnerable people towards broader outcomes). In this respect, the notion of necessary and sufficient conditions need to be viewed as the poles of a continuum.

Community / Neighbourhood sports as sufficient conditions?

The concept of **community/neighbourhood sports** originally arose out of the realization that traditional participation patterns were dominated by advantaged sections of the population and that an alternative approach was needed (Hylton & Totten, 2008). The term refers in essence to the use and the combination of specific methodologies that are different from the more traditional sports delivery formats. The methodology of community/neighbourhood sports is described by Hylton and Totten (2008) as a flexible, adaptable, informal, interactive, people-centred approach, aimed at lowering the initial thresholds to participation in order to address the deficiencies of mainstream provision. Theeboom (2008) has added that such a community/neighbourhood approach would need to encompass a structural cooperation between a variety of organisations, the application of a

broader conceptual definition of sports, the creative use of community infrastructure, a clear diversity of organisational formats and a demand-driven offer based on the specific characteristics of the targeted population.

It is important to note that one overall community/neighbourhood sports format does not exist in the Flemish context. Findings of a study that attempted to determine the actual position of neighbourhood sports in Flanders, in which data were collected among representatives of 250 Flemish municipalities, as well as among 30 Flemish expert witnesses and 10 good practices, indicated that there is a wide diversity of organisational formats in neighbourhood sports (Theeboom et al., 2008a).

The methodology of community or neighbourhood sports needs to be seen as a way to optimize the necessary conditions for local sport-for-all participation opportunities. A community/neighbourhood approach is first and foremost used as a means to get more people involved in an organised sports offer, people who would otherwise not be reached by the more mainstream sports provision structures. As such, a community/neighbourhood approach cannot be considered as inherently creating the sufficient conditions in order for sports to amount to something more than 'mere participation'. Simply put, it's not because more people are reached (in their own neighbourhoods), that more people will have actually benefited from their sports participation, and in particular people in vulnerable situations.

Sport-plus

There is a broad consensus that if sports are to play a wider social role in the lives of young people, it would need to be part of a broader project in which providing sports are not the only strategic aim (Coalter, 2007; Crabbe, 2006; Nichols, 2007; Sandford et al., 2006). More recently, such an approach became known as '**sport-plus**', referring to the specific and intentional augmentations to and adaptations of sports programs that aim at achieving broader outcomes (Coalter, 2010). In addition, the concept of sport-plus encompasses both the notion

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of sports as a means and sports as an end in its self. The following criteria could be identified which constitutes sport-plus practices for youth (based on Coalter, 2007a; Mahoney et al., 2005): sports activities have regular meetings; presence of adult supervision and guidance; sports activities are organised around developing particular sports skills and achieving sports related goals; sports are not the only strategic aim; sport activities are augmented and adjusted in terms of achieving broader social aims with youth; sport activities are targeted at youth (14-25 yrs.).
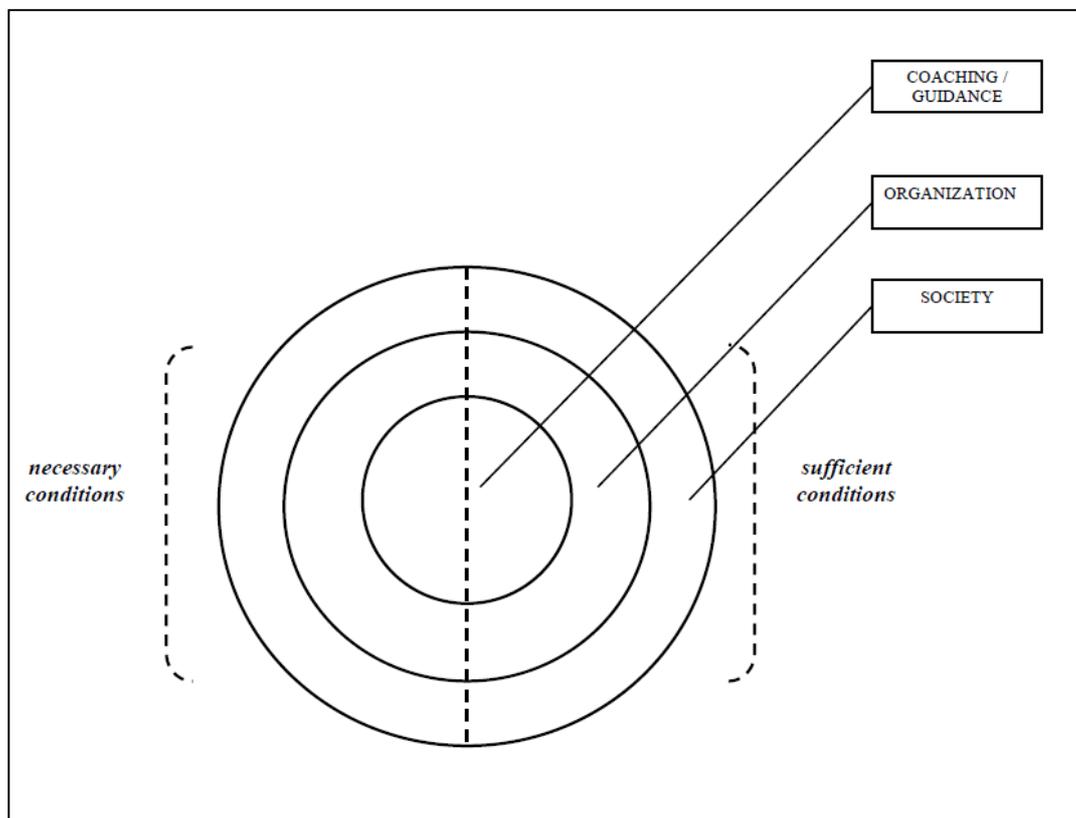

Figure A Schematic overview of necessary and sufficient conditions.

In relation to the concept of sport-plus, the focus of the PhD study will be on gaining more insights in the adjustments and augmentations of sport-plus practices working with socially vulnerable youth towards broader outcomes. In particular, this study will look at sufficient conditions in terms of coaching practices and organisational dimensions (see Figure A). As depicted by Fig. A, necessary (left side) and sufficient (right side) conditions can both be situated on the level of coaching/guidance, organisational features and society.

Sports coaching has been defined by Lyle (2011, p. 13) both as *'a field of activity with a multiplicity of roles'*, and as '*an aggregation of behaviour and practice intended to result in improved sport performance'*. According to Lyle (2011), a coach is defined in his/her relationship to the sporting intentions of the participant and by a level of developed expertise (i.e, certification and/or prior experience). Important in Lyle's conceptualisation is the recognition of coaching as a process that creates social meaning, instead of mere individual characteristics.

Lammers et al. (2000) noted that in terms of defining the concept 'organisation' different authors attribute miscellaneous characteristics. An organisation has been defined by Etzioni (1964, p. 3) as '*a social unit (or human groupings) deliberately constructed and reconstructed to seek specific goals*.' A distinction has also been made between the 'founding members' of an organisation, who have a form of leadership and authority (e.g., sports program administrators, coaches), and the 'subjugated members', who submit themselves to the organisational processes instigated by the founding members (e.g., sport participants, coaches) (Lammers et al., 2000).

By reading and juxtaposition the above definitions of 'coaching' and 'organisation', we can immediately spot grey zones, in which coaching practices could evenly be considered as part of organisational processes and vice versa.

Aspect regarding 'society' need to be viewed as those conditions that need to be in place so that organisations and coaches are supported and enabled in working towards broader outcomes through sports. A possible way of looking at a society is how available resources (e.g., economical, social, cultural, political) are distributed amongst its population, the mechanisms underpinning such a distribution and the outcomes of such a distribution system for specific groups in society. However, such broader conditions have not been included in this study, as this would require a different research approach that would allow analysing the settings in which sport-plus practices operate from a broader socio-political perspective.

Brief outline of the PhD study

The study contains four chapters. Each chapter can be read independently of the other.

In **chapter 1,** we position the theory of social vulnerability with current state-of-the-art research in relation to using sports as a means to create wider social outcomes for young people. In this chapter, the theory of social vulnerability (Vettenburg, 1998) is put forward as a conceptual framework for generating more insights regarding coaching practices and organisational dimensions. The chapter draws both from research in the domains of applied sport research and youth-related studies. It furthermore identifies potential research pathways, which can lead to a better understanding of the potential of sports for socially vulnerable people, but more importantly how such a potential can be unlocked.

For **chapter 2**, the aim is to gain more insights in how sports are delivered for youth who could be considered as socially vulnerable. Although there are some indications that when working towards broader outcomes with socially vulnerable youth a specific methodology is required, it remains unclear what constitutes this specificity within a sports context (Theeboom et al, 2008b). For this, a Flemish (northern region of Belgium) sports (boxing) project was selected in which data were gathered by means of in-depth and focus

group interviews with participants, coaches and key-witnesses. Drawing on the findings from the field research, the chapter critically analyses coaching dimensions with regard to perceptivity towards youth's well-being, motivational climate, authority relationships, socio-psychological competences, the sports model and working towards competence. Apart from these socio-pedagogical coaching dimensions, the chapter also describes how the cultural capital of coaches interacts within the context of the sport-plus initiative.

Whereas chapter two mainly focuses on how sports are delivered, **chapter 3** looks at the experiences young people have had in the context of a sport-plus practice, with the aim of better understanding the potential of sports for socially vulnerable youth. Findings are presented from a two-year field study in the context of a selected sport-plus practice. Two different research approaches were chosen for each year. In the first year, a more 'conventional' qualitative approach was used, whereas in the second year a more participatory and interactive research approach was adopted. Compared to the semi-structured interviews, the stimulated-recall method seemed to allow a higher degree of interactivity with and engagement of young people that were interviewed. Using video-stimulated recall methods, whereby young people were stimulated to reflect on previous accounts, has proven to be valuable in better understanding the unique experiences from the perspective of the young people we interviewed, and how such experiences could be related to aspects of social vulnerability. From the field research it was found that boxing, within the setting of the selected sport-plus practice, meant different things for different participants. Considering the unique personal and situational characteristics of young people that were involved in the study, it could be reasonable expected that participating in the boxing initiative, generated unique experiences, which had divergent outcomes. Implications for doing research with young people are covered in the third chapter.

In **chapter 4,** we critically examine the burgeoning scientific discourse about sports-based interventions for socially vulnerable or disadvantaged youth from a socio-pedagogical perspective. It is argued that the call for more well-defined sports-based social interventions with easier-to-follow outcomes may be at odds with the open ended philosophy that is viewed as a fundamental principle when engaging with socially vulnerable youth in a leisure context (Smith, 2003), and could potentially undermine the effectiveness and value of such practices for young people. We examine the question if supporting young people in social vulnerable situations will be best served with well-defined sports-based interventions with easy-to-follow outcomes. We argue that if outcomes are to be formulated or analysed, such outcomes need to go beyond narrow conceptions of individual development, and need to be defined in consultation with young people.

Problems

When one wants to climb a mountain (an effort almost comparable to that of making a PhD), some routes will prove to be less traversable than others, and some equipment will be less usable than originally expected. As a consequence, some routes will need to be abandoned and some equipment needs to be left behind in order to make it, in one piece, to the top. In this part, a short overview is presented in terms of encountered problems and abandoned research routes regarding the PhD study.

The inherent difficulty of (measuring) social vulnerability

Throughout the research, we were confronted with an inherent difficulty regarding the concept of social vulnerability. Walgrave (1992) already pointed out the intrinsic difficulty to define socially vulnerable young people, since young people in vulnerable situations (and young people in general) are a very heterogeneous group. The term 'socially vulnerable youth' in itself could lead to putting too much emphasise on the agency of young people,

although the theory of social vulnerability encompasses both agency and structure. A more correct expression would be to speak of 'young people in vulnerable situations'.

It was the aim of the PhD study to construct an instrument or scale allowing to measure aspects of social vulnerability (see Vettenburg, 1988) and linking these with young people's sports participation. Such an instrument was not constructed, due to the choice of using a case study approach in which more qualitative research methods were developed and employed in order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's experiences. The original idea of constructing one instrument that would allow measuring various aspects regarding social vulnerability, which could then be put in relation to young people's sports participation, was considered not feasible within the scope of four-year PhD study, due to the complexity of young people's social vulnerability

Furthermore, it was felt that more insights into the experiences of young people, and the underlying process instigating such experiences within a sports setting, was needed before attempting to construct such an instrument. Gaining insights in such experiences and underlying processes required a more flexible and engaging approach. In **chapter 3**, we did use a more structured or directive questionnaire, allowing to measure aspects related to social vulnerability (see Appendix A). However, the questionnaire would need to be further developed, and used within a larger sample. Also, the questionnaire did only include cultural factors related to processes of social vulnerability, the implications of which are discussed in the third chapter.

Coaching & organisational dimensions

Although it was the intention to cover both coaching and organisational dimensions, the focus of the PhD study has shifted more towards the coaching level. However, the line between coaching and organisational dimensions is not absolute. In other words, where

coaching processes ends and organisation processes start, are not that clearly delineated and are open for discussion. Notwithstanding this, specific organisational dimensions concerning sport-plus practices have in this PhD study not been touched from an organisation theoretical perspective.

Multiple sports settings

As already outlined sufficient conditions could be studied across different sports programs or interventions, irrespective of their perceived traditional 'mainstream' or alternative 'community or neighbourhood' characteristics. However, this PhD study did not include different settings. It was decided to focus the research on one Flemish provincial boxing initiative, since this provided us to study young people in several contexts within the same initiative. Also, the choice was made to stick to one 'case' allowing for an optimal immersion into the selected sport setting. In essence, a case study is a research strategy - not a method - that focuses on understanding the real-life dynamics in one setting (Yin, 1994). Important to note is that a case study can encompass different research methods (e.g., observations, interviews, questionnaires). However, more research is needed that focuses on the experiences of young people in relation to broader social outcomes, within different sport and sport-plus settings (i.e., multiple cases).

Research ethics

During our interactions with young people, we did not refer to the term social vulnerability. On the hand, this was because out of concerns to categorize or stigmatize young people. On the other hand, the selected sport-plus initiative has had bad experiences in coverage by local newspapers as a project for 'problem' and 'poor' youth. The result of this media coverage was that young people started asking questions of the head coach about what

this meant, and some even decided to leave the initiative because of this. From the beginning, it was asked to be careful about using specific labels. Hence, it was decided not to mention the concept of social vulnerability in our interactions with youth. However, not explicating the theoretical framework with participating youth impeded the research in understanding experiences and how such experiences can be linked to the role of sports in mitigating processes of social vulnerability. In this context, France (2004, p.183) argued that *'[...] if we are committed to listening to young people's voice we need to give them detailed information about the research [...] Doing this requires us to enter into dialogue with them about the aims and objectives of the research and about our practice.'* Incorporating a more transparent way of doing research is believed to generate more interesting and worthwhile findings, which can positively impact on the lives of young people (Alderson, 2004). Social vulnerability is essentially a multifaceted concept which various between individuals. Such variations could have been discussed with young people that were involved in the study. However, from an ethical standpoint researchers need to avoid sensitive areas, which may inflict social, emotional and psychological harm for young people we involve in our inquiry. This responsibility to protect may prevent us from digging deeper into the experiences, which vulnerable young people have had, and how their participation in a sports setting these can be linked to their experiences regarding social sports participation within a given setting.

Complexity of social practices

Coalter (2007), referring to Ray Pawson, has described sports-based social interventions as *complex systems thrust amidst complex ever changing open systems*. The selected case study for this PhD study was no exception to this. Partaking within a specific sports setting is not the same as receiving a treatment of which the impact can easily be controlled and measured. Sport-plus programs cannot furthermore be switched *ON* or *OFF*.

Consequently, the so-called hard scientific method would seem to have little currency and explanatory power in the area of sports-based social interventions.

In addition, the setting of the selected case study proved to be complex and ever changing. As described in the second and third chapter, the selected sport-plus case study offered both regular boxing sessions for a broader public and instructional boxing sessions specifically targeted at socially vulnerable young people. During the first year of the field study, the instructional boxing sessions, in which young people were offered boxing sessions, teamwork activities and counselling moments (see chapter 2 & 3 for more information), had a more open approach whereby young people could come in on Monday (the day when such sessions were provided) without a specific trajectory.

However, in the second year of the field research the concept of the instructional sessions changed. It was felt by the project-coordinator that a more structured trajectory was necessary, mainly since young people irregularly attended the provided instructional sessions. This notion illustrates the debate about the degree of structure and flexibility of sport-plus practices (and youth practices in general) in relation to the outcomes such practices produce, which will be described in **chapter 1**. It was decided to organise a structured three-month trajectory. In order to participate, young people would need to sign an engagement letter, stating that they would commit themselves fully to participate in the trajectory. Furthermore, at the start of the trajectory the group pedagogical worker, who assisted in organising the instructional sessions, determined together with every participant so-called 'working points'. Young people would then need to improve their identified working points during the trajectory.

Finally, after the conclusion of the field research, significant changes were again introduced. The teamwork activities would be more focused on boxing, young people would be given coaching opportunities, counselling sessions would be mainly done on the basis of

one-on-one talks with the pedagogical group worker and the practice of working points would be made more implicit. In sum, it was decided to integrate the augmented and added features more in the boxing activities. Experiences from previous instructional sessions showed that when too much emphasis was put on doing teamwork activities, improving working points and counselling sessions, young people were turned off by it (since they came first and foremost for boxing).

To add to the complexity, some young people partaking in the instructional boxing sessions already participated in former editions of such instructional boxing sessions, where others did not. Furthermore, some young people participated in both the context of the regular boxing sessions and the instructional boxing sessions, and some young people already participated in the regular sessions for a while before entering the instructional sessions, whereas other never participated in the regular sessions before entering the instructional sessions.

All this would make it an exercise in futility to establish "effects" or make generalisations about boxing (even within the same initiative) based on young people's multifarious participation in the context of the sport-plus initiative. It further increases the difficulty of trying to understand the potential value of sport-plus practices for socially vulnerable youth. Complexity is an inherent quality of reality. This PhD has tried to directly study the reality of a sport-plus setting, through the experiences and perspectives of those involved. Interpretations and conclusions that were drawn from the PhD study have tried to mirror this complexity - instead of tying things up in a neat bundle - with the aim of making the complexity of one sport-plus practice, a bit less opaque (Wolcott, 2009).

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There are no facts, only interpretations.

Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844 – 1900, German Philosopher)

CHAPTER 1

Towards Understanding Sports-based Practices for Socially Vulnerable Youth

Chapter overview

Sports have long been viewed as an opportunity to engage young people in a positive alternative and not just in terms of participation in sports activities, but across a range of issues including education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles. Much scepticism revolves around sport's wider social role, due to an unavailability of convincing evidence supporting such claims (Coalter, 2007a). Terms that have been used to address youth for whom such practices are conceived lack any clear scientific underpinning and have failed to address institutional structures and social arrangements that tend to keep these youth target groups (Weiss, 1998). In this chapter we propose a conceptual framework, which encompasses both agency and structure. By using the theory of social vulnerability (Vettenburg, 1998), we will discuss what has already been written on the level of the coaching in and the organising of sports-based practices for vulnerable youth.

Introduction

Sports have long been viewed as an opportunity to engage young people in a positive alternative and not just in terms of participation in sports activities, but across a range of issues including education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles. The focus of such sports practices has increasingly been on providing organised sports in neighbourhoods that suffer from territorial stigmatization, concentration of poverty and marginalization. It is presumed that youth from such neighbourhoods are less likely to participate in organised activities (Collins & Kay, 2003; Kamphuis et al., 2008, Rankin & Quane, 2002), which consequently would rob them of the assumed benefits that are associated with involvement in organised sports. The involvement in organised sports is believed to have positive implications for youth's self-concept as well as their academic commitment and educational expectations (Quane & Rankin, 2006).

The term social vulnerability broadly refers to the distorted and disconnected relations of young people with the institutions of society (Vettenburg, 1998). Underserved-, at-risk, disaffected, disadvantaged, lower class, problem, excluded, marginalized, deprived have all been used to address those youth, but have failed to increase our understanding mainly because symptoms are confounded with causes (Bailey, 2007). Most of the terms that have been used also lack any clear scientific underpinning, leaving us behind, rather than forward in understanding how sports programs can hope to create social benefits for youth. Such concepts have failed to address the institutional structures and social arrangements that tend to keep these youth target groups (Weiss, 1998). Social vulnerability encompasses both agency and structure. By its very nature, social vulnerability is about interactional processes. People are always vulnerable in relation to something or somebody. Central in the theory of social vulnerability is the progressive accumulation of negative experiences with institutions of